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COMMITTEE ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

Seventeenth session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 440th MEETING

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva,
on Wednesday, 14 January 1998, at 10 a.m.

Chairperson: Miss MASON

CONTENTS

CONSIDERATION OF REPORTS OF STATES PARTIES (continued)

Initial report of the Federated States of Micronesia

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The meeting was called to order at 10.05 a.m.

CONSIDERATION OF REPORTS OF STATES PARTIES (agenda item 4) (continued)

Initial report of the Federated States of Micronesia (CRC/C/28/Add.5; HRI/CORE/1/Add.72; CRC/C/Q/M/1)

1. At the invitation of the Chairperson, Ms. Eejima (Federated States of Micronesia) took a place at the Committee table.

2. Ms. EEJIMA (Federated States of Micronesia) said that the Federated States of Micronesia had formally become a nation as recently as 1986 and was one of the newest members of the United Nations. The Convention on the Rights of the Child had been the first international instrument to which it had acceded in 1993, and the country had the honour of being the first of the Pacific Island countries to submit its initial report.

3. Her Government was faced with the challenge of attempting to implement the Convention despite severe resource constraints and a difficult socio-economic legacy from colonial times. One of the poorest political entities of what had been called the United States-Associated Pacific Islands, the country was lacking in a social services infrastructure and was suffering from chronic underdevelopment in education and health, with the highest incidences of leprosy and Vitamin A deficiency in the world. Implementation of the Convention was further complicated by the country's geographical and demographic situation. The population of only 105,506 persons was scattered over isolated islands spread throughout three million square kilometres and across three time zones. There was also a wide diversity of cultures and languages to be taken into account.

4. The Government had, however, made modest progress towards disseminating the Convention, including the establishment of a President's National Advisory Council on Children (PNACC). Although the PNACC had to operate without a national budget, it was managing to encourage the development of analogous advisory councils in the four constituent states, three of which already had such bodies, which were akin to non-governmental organizations (NGOs). On a further positive note, the Attorney-General's Office of the Federated States of Micronesia was currently engaged in a review of laws, regulations and policies for the purposes of achieving harmonization with the Convention.

5. Much remained to be done, however, before the country would be able to live up to its commitments under the Convention. In particular, further resources were needed to promote grass-roots support for the rights of children who, together with their mothers, made up the greater part of the country's population. The Government would be endeavouring to live up to the Convention's principle and promote the well-being of children, its most vulnerable and most valuable resource.

6. Mr. FULCI said that the Committee quite understood the extreme difficulties of the environment in which the Government was operating. The compilers of the report were to be commended on their adherence to the Committee's guidelines and on the honesty with which they had described the constraints on implementation of the Convention. The report was both

comprehensive and comprehensible, although statistical data were not always up to date. The population, health and education indicators in paragraph 6 of the report, for example, dated from 1989.

7. Enumerating the significant number of major international human rights instruments not yet ratified by the State party in question, all of which had a direct impact on children's rights, he requested details of the steps being taken by the Government to address that situation. Lastly, he would like to know what specific measures were being adopted to increase public awareness, particularly among children, of the benefits derivable from the Convention.

8. Mrs. SARDENBERG said that the Committee appreciated the important gesture the Government had made in submitting its report in a timely fashion, since compliance with the reporting procedures was an integral part of a State party's obligations under the Convention. Although the report was to be commended on its openness, it did, however, suffer from a certain imbalance, in that some parts were more informative than others. Judging from apparent discrepancies of tone and attitude, she wondered whether a different team had been responsible for compiling the written replies to the list of issues.

9. More information would be appreciated concerning developmental differences between the four states of the Federation. The Committee would also welcome further details on the country's administrative system and recent political history, especially since there seemed to be some inconsistencies in the dates provided with respect to its accession to independence. Given that the responsibility for the defence of the nation was delegated to the United States, she would like to know what the actual degree of autonomy in other areas was.

10. The reporting procedure offered an opportunity for a Government to involve all sectors of society in the preparation of its country report and, in so doing, to give impetus to the principles of the Convention. She, consequently, asked if any NGOs had helped to elaborate the report currently before the Committee.

11. Mrs. PALME said that the small size of the population no doubt limited the country's market potential, reducing the amount of foreign investment available for development purposes. In view of the fact that article 4 of the Convention stipulated that States parties "shall undertake such measures to the maximum extent of their available resources and, where needed, within the framework of international cooperation", she would like to know how the changes in the country's economy resulting from agreements with the United States would affect the long-term implementation of the national plan of action, which was apparently in draft form. Such plans were, after all, meant to ensure a more goal-oriented long-term strategy for children. She also hoped that the Convention would be translated into the local languages.

12. NGOs should play a more active role in the future, both in the reporting procedure and as partners for implementing and disseminating the Convention. Governments changed, whereas NGOs had a longer-term involvement with children's rights.

13. Mrs. MOKHUANE asked whether, in view of its economic constraints, the Government would be able to adhere to its goal of implementing the national plan of action in 1998?

14. She was concerned that the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women had not yet been ratified, since discrimination against women in education and in everyday life had a direct impact on children.

15. The paucity of the data compiled on children seemed to indicate either a lack of motivation or of infrastructure, pointing to inadequate training on the relevance of the Convention. She wished to know, therefore, what was being done to redress the situation, and according to what specific time frame.

16. Mrs. KARP requested clarification of the division of power between national and state authorities in the light of the Government's inability, as stated in the written answers, to inform the Committee of the steps being taken by the states to harmonize their laws with the Convention. The issue was of great importance, since it was the Federation which was a party to the Convention and which, consequently, had the responsibility of ensuring that its constituent governments complied with their obligations. How did the national Government intend to encourage or, if it was so empowered, to direct the states to meet their commitments?

17. Since, to date, only one of the states possessed an Advisory Council for Children, it was unclear how implementation of the Convention was being monitored. How did the lack of centralization and absence of any coordinating mechanism affect cooperation and resource allocation?

18. An adequate system of data collection was vital for informing policies and programmes and for ensuring that they were properly adapted to the needs of children. Did the Government plan to alter the manner in which the data on children was compiled, in view of the fact that statistics in the country report were not disaggregated in accordance with the Convention's definition of a child?

19. The written replies would have benefited from reference to other fields of violations of children's rights, such as abuse and neglect.

20. Since the Government seemed well aware of the steps that needed to be taken, the Committee had little to do but recommend that the Government implement its own proposals as outlined in the report. To that end, it evidently needed a plan of action with a specific time frame.

21. Mr. KOLOSOV said that communication among the scattered islands was obviously not easy and that he quite understood that it was not realistically feasible for officials to travel throughout the territory in order to monitor the situation. The country's "elder brother" in the free association was not itself party to the Convention, so the Committee was unable to ask the United States to help the Federated States of Micronesia in that regard.

22. Only a tiny proportion of society appeared to be aware of the Convention and in a position to understand its implications. Since the churches seemed to be the sole institutions possessing a country-wide network and well-organized infrastructure, and since they appeared to play an influential role in young people's lives, it might be an idea to establish a partnership with the church authorities, with a view to furthering the dissemination of the Convention throughout the country's scattered territory.

23. The CHAIRPERSON said that, since United States funding was to be reduced over the coming years, the question of how the future national plan of action would be implemented was all the more pertinent. How would the recent ministerial and budgetary reforms within the Government affect the implementation of the Convention, and which new government department would be responsible for children's affairs?

24. She would also welcome some clarification of the issue of customary law. Was marriage the only area of society life in which such law was recognized, and which type of law took precedence when conflicts arose?

25. Ms. EEJIMA (Federated States of Micronesia) said that the country was a federation with a national Government set up under the Constitution, which also recognized the existence of four separate states. Over various areas, jurisdiction was allocated both to the state governments and to the national Government. Jurisdiction was sometimes concurrent and sometimes exclusive: the collection of national income tax, for example, fell within the sovereign jurisdiction of the national Government, whereas health and education matters enjoyed concurrent jurisdiction. That system might seem somewhat complicated for a nation with a population of 105,000, and it was true to say that, with so many different layers, conflicts sometimes arose, as each state was also subdivided into municipalities and villages and the executive, judicial and legislative branches of government functioned at the national, state, municipal and village levels.

26. Overlapping those political entities were traditional entities, which also varied from state to state, from island to island and even from lineage to lineage. Traditional leaders exercised their respective roles, obligations and jurisdiction over geographical areas, clans, or both. In addition to those overlapping and sometimes conflicting entities, there were also language differences.

27. The political history of the Federated States was set out in paragraphs 24 to 27 of the core document (HRI/CORE/1/Add.72). The political and economic relationship with the United States of America was that of two sovereign States. The United States had free military access to the Federated States, in return for a 15-year programme of financial and technical assistance, due to end in 2001, which primarily related to the areas of education and health. The Federated States had inherited many vestiges of the administration of the United Nations Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands (TTPI), and the initial report explained the difficulties encountered in dealing with the legacy of that framework, especially with regard to the delivery of health-care services to children and mothers.

28. There was an urgent need to update the statistical data, especially in view of the termination in 2001 of the United States federal funding programmes under the Compact of Free Association. There was also a need to bring the statistics on children into line with the definition of the child under article 1 of the Convention.

29. The Federated States were not currently taking steps to ratify any international treaty other than the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. That Convention had been submitted to Congress and was in the Committee stage. Ratification would involve hearings within the four constituent states, requiring á congressional delegation and staff to travel from island to island. To date, no hearings had been held, but it was expected that they would take place at the General Session to be held in the spring of 1998.

30. There were undoubtedly serious communication and information gaps between the various national and government officials responsible for preparing the initial report and the written replies. Even medium-ranking government officials had been unaware of the existence of the Convention until briefed on its provisions.

31. Although organized religion was a dominant factor in national society, no established church existed as such. The two dominant religious groups were Protestants and Catholics. As informal NGOs, the churches were in a fairly good position to disseminate information. As yet they had exercised little influence on the implementation of the Convention, but their wealth of resources and community networks could yet prove invaluable in that regard.

32. The authorities of the Federated States did not view the provisions of the Convention in isolation. The Constitution and various legislative enactments guaranteed absolutely the rights to due process, equal protection under the law, freedom of expression and association and basic health care and education. Those provisions were viewed as inherently bound up with the Convention, implementation of which could thus be secured through the continued upholding of those rights, and of the obligations of the national Government and the state governments, through existing provisions and protections.

33. The national plan of action was still at a very rudimentary stage of drafting. It would, in due course, set forth the mechanisms and strategies for implementing the Convention at grass-roots level, and also for dealing with the problem of declining donor assistance. A Compact renegotiation committee had recently been constituted and authorized to enter into discussions with the United States Government concerning renegotiation of the Compact provisions relating to federal programmes and their funding. PNACC had made it quite clear to the President and the renegotiation committee that the principle of "First Call" (CRC/C/28/Add.5, para. 27) was fundamental to the future delivery of health-care services to children and mothers and of education to children.

34. The initial report and the recent replies by the Government of the Federated States had been coordinated by the chairman of PNACC, the former Director of the Pacific Basin Medical Officers Training Programme. It was doubtless for that reason that primary health-care issues - which were in any

case a crucial aspect of the Government's implementation efforts - were accorded such full coverage. Both documents had been prepared by the same sectoral departments of the national Government.

35. Preparation of the initial report and of the written replies had proved a very valuable learning experience, especially with regard to NGO involvement. As was pointed out in the written replies, registered NGOs were a new phenomenon in the Federated States and their involvement was certainly welcome. The allegations of failure adequately to involve NGOs, referred to in the written replies to issues 7 and 11, were attributable to communication problems. The concerns of the NGO in question had been brought to the Government's attention as recently as October 1997, through the inter-sessional working group, and it appeared that the communication difficulties had since been resolved.

36. The Government's admitted ignorance of the situation in the states with regard to harmonization of their laws with the Convention was attributable to the fact that it had received the list of issues only a few weeks previously. The relevant information would be forwarded to the Committee as soon as it had been received from the states.

37. As for the differing levels of development among the four states, Pohnpei, as the centre of national Government, was the most developed state. The other three states were less economically active, subsistence farming and fishing being the main activities.

38. The national Government had been reorganized with effect from 1 January 1998. Under that reorganization, its workforce would be cut by 20 per cent over three years through a compulsory and voluntary early retirement programme. The state governments were also being reorganized under a programme of economic reform funded by the Asian Development Bank which was designed to establish a healthy private sector before the termination of the Compact. Public utilities, postal and other government services were being privatized. Those measures would undoubtedly have a negative impact on the delivery of services across the board. However, the silver lining to that cloud was that those cuts had compelled the authorities to reconsider their priorities. Thus, in the long run, the termination of the Compact should lead to a more creative use of funds.

39. The reduction of financial resources also had an impact on PNACC - an unfunded Advisory Council. The Chairman of the Council had unfortunately been prevented from attending the Committee's session because no funds had been available for the costs of his travel to Geneva. The costs incurred by her own Department for her trip to Geneva had virtually exhausted its travel budget for the fiscal year - an important consideration since it was that budget which enabled its officials to travel from island to island. PNACC had requested financing from Congress, but had currently to rely on the goodwill of government departments and individuals to remain operational. It was true that PNACC was strong on making recommendations but weak on implementing them but that was attributable to the financial constraints under which it had to operate.

40. There was a fascinating interplay between uncodified customary law and enacted legislation at the national, state and local levels. Under the Constitution, the courts were bound to take custom and tradition into account in their consideration of legal issues. In practice, however, that provision was seldom invoked, as few of the legal issues raised in the national courts concerned areas to which custom and tradition were applicable. There was a legal process for handling conflict between enacted legislation and customary and traditional law.

41. Customary marriages, i.e. cohabitation by men and women without the sanction of law or of a church, were not the only form of customary law: customary adoptions were widely and openly accepted throughout the Micronesian area. There were many reasons for customary and traditional adoption, including the solidification of ties between families, the maintenance of lineage rights among family members, and the fulfilment of such obligations as the repayment of a favour. A child born out of wedlock was often adopted; that practice bore no taboo or stigma. The concept of anonymous adoption was unknown; an adopted child always knew his birth family, and there was close contact between the birth and adoptive families.

42. Mrs. KARP inquired whether a plan of action had been formulated to address all aspects of the implementation of the Convention, and whether the Government had considered the enactment of proactive measures for the protection of children's rights. It would also be useful to know the relationship between the national Government and the states with regard to the establishment of such standards as a minimum age of criminal responsibility or a minimum working age. Were the states responsible for legislating on behalf of children, and if so, what measures had been taken to resolve the problem of discrimination based on state-to-state differences in the provision of services?

43. It was unclear, moreover, what the jurisdiction of the PNACC was, and its relationship to state and regional bodies in the important matter of cooperation was not specified. In view of the significant problems experienced by the Federated States in dealing with the problems of neglect and abuse, why had the post of coordinator for the Child Abuse and Neglect Programme (CAN) been abolished?

44. Mrs. SARDENBERG said that, although it was commendable that the Federated States had chosen to ratify the Convention on the Rights of the Child, she would like to know why it had not ratified the other essential international human rights instruments that one of her colleagues had mentioned.

45. She would also like to know more about the effect of the economic transition on culture and society, and what measures, if any, had been taken to soften its impact on the lives of children. The President had issued a proclamation at the time of the Federated States' accession to the Convention; it would be useful to know whether any follow-up measures had been taken, and what further role the President had played.

46. More information would be useful concerning the impact of the cessation of the Compact of Free Association, and in particular, its effect on education, health, and defence. What measures was the Government taking to cope with that transition? Did the Federated States envisage entering into any new agreements with the United States of America? She inquired whether the Federated States received assistance from international NGOs and international organizations, and whether it was participating in any bilateral cooperation programmes.

47. Mrs. PALME said she was impressed to learn from the report by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), The State of the World's Children, 1998, that the Federated States had a very low mortality rate for children under the age of five, a fact which was surely attributable to the Government's emphasis on health and education. She wondered whether the Government had considered synchronizing the principles embodied in the Declaration and Plan of Action adopted by the World Summit for Children with the terms of the Convention in developing statistical data concerning children, especially since such data would have a significant effect on the ability of the Federated States to procure development assistance. Finally, it would be interesting to know how the Government intended to develop its taxation system, particularly with regard to children.

48. Mrs. OUEDRAOGO asked whether members of the traditional governance system had accepted the Convention, whether they had been involved in the drafting of the report, and whether steps had been taken to encourage respect for the views of children.

49. Mrs. MOKHUANE inquired what was the position of the Government with regard to abortion, and when childhood legally commenced. Furthermore, what was the attitude of Micronesian women toward caring for their own reproductive health? Did the Government anticipate problems in the area of child labour under the new cash economy, especially in view of the lack of minimum wage regulations?

50. Mrs. KARP said, first of all, that appointment of the Ministry of Finance to the membership of the PNACC might prove a useful way of resolving the problem of the allocation of resources. Secondly, she asked whether the Government had envisaged involving the participation of members of the traditional community in efforts to change traditional attitudes.

51. Mr. FULCI said that paragraph 154 of the report indicated that many infant deaths went unrecorded, a phenomenon that might have influenced the low infant mortality rates published in The State of the World's Children, 1998. The Government asserted that the principle of non-discrimination was embodied in the Constitution but it would be useful to know whether there was an explicit reference to non-discrimination against children.

52. The CHAIRPERSON inquired whether any studies had been undertaken to assess the impact of the drastic governmental reorganization on the lives of the population, and in particular on behaviour, social interaction within the family, and the quality of life.

53. Ms. EJIMA (Federated States of Micronesia) said that the Government had thus far concentrated its efforts in the area of children's rights on preparing the report, on conducting training seminars and workshops, and on drafting the replies to the list of issues. She agreed that the next step was the formulation of a national plan of action, and that it should focus on proactive implementation measures.

54. The governmental structure of the Federated States was based on that of the United States of America. In accordance with the concept of pre-emption, when the national Government legislated on a particular matter, the state was pre-empted from doing so. In the cases mentioned, it fell to the national Government to set minimal standards. PNACC, as a national body, was responsible for monitoring the implementation of the Convention at both the national and state levels, and any state legislative practices that contravened national legislation would be invalid.

55. She was not aware that the post of coordinator for the Child Abuse and Neglect Programme had been eliminated but, under the current reorganization of the Government, many changes were taking place rapidly. The Departments of Health and Education, which had been combined in the past, were once again being merged.

56. Educating the general public about the Convention was a difficult undertaking since the rights of children were often dismissed out of hand. She had found that only after a substantial discussion of the real principles and purposes of the Convention did an understanding begin to emerge; that was particularly so with professionals. The Government's written replies contained a list of all those events and workshops it had undertaken in order to disseminate the Convention throughout the Federated States, including workshops for professionals, especially in the areas of health and education. No particular department monitored the implementation of the Convention; that was the purview of PNACC, which was itself made up of representatives of many departments.

57. The Federated States of Micronesia was a new country; if it had not yet ratified certain international instruments, that was because it had not had the time or opportunity to examine their provisions and implications.

58. No studies had been undertaken to assess the impact of the economic transition on culture and society. Traditionally, on some islands, young girls were taught to fish whereas, on others, young boys were taught to fish. Such activities were an integral part of social and productive life, and there was no doubt that the changeover to a cash economy would diminish the emphasis on learning subsistence skills. Studies had, however, been undertaken to evaluate the privatization process. Among the measures adopted by the Government to strengthen the private economy were the teaching of entrepreneurial skills, the furnishing of low-interest business loans, and the provision of investment counselling for recipients of early-retirement compensation packages.

59. The follow-up to the President's proclamation regarding the Convention was the establishment of PNACC. Keeping children's issues alive was an uphill task calling for continuous personal contacts with officials because of the concentration on economic reform and renegotiation of the Compact of Free

Association with the United States. PNACC was finding it extremely difficult to survive without funding and adequate government support, and the national plan of action had not yet been finalized.

60. The Government had set up a Committee to formulate policies and establish positions for renegotiation of the Compact of Free Association. It was as yet unclear whether the existing Compact would be extended or a new agreement concluded.

61. Japan was the main source of bilateral assistance after the United States, followed by Australia, New Zealand and China. Smaller amounts of financial or technical assistance were also obtained under other treaties, not necessarily related to human rights issues.

62. Many statistics were certainly out of date, particularly those concerning infant mortality, but it was very difficult to convince officials that the recording of events and trends was not a mere abstract exercise but had important implications for health and well-being.

63. No traditional leaders were represented on PNACC but they had been consulted when Council members visited the states to prepare the initial report. Their reaction to children's rights was similar to that of the general public, namely a tendency to dismiss the idea initially and to revise their opinion gradually in the light of cogent arguments. The process of changing attitudes would take months or even years of interaction and dialogue, and measures to involve traditional leaders in that process would certainly be included in the national plan of action.

64. The Government had no official position on abortion. Although she knew of cases of individual doctors refusing to perform abortions, she had no specific information regarding the general situation and would provide a more coherent response later in writing.

65. There was no child workforce as such, but the extended family used a certain amount of child labour. The Office of the Attorney-General was currently awaiting a response from the Division of Labour regarding draft legislation on the minimum age of employment and on working hours and conditions for children.

66. The Minister of Finance had limited policy-making authority and was mainly responsible for administrative issues relating to internal financial and budgetary issues and the coordination of outside aid. The real policy makers on PNACC came from the Departments of Health and Education and they were also the people working hardest to obtain monetary resources.

67. In response to a question from Mrs. KARP, she said that any expansion of the membership of PNACC would be welcome, particularly if sectoral representation was thereby enhanced. The personal dynamics of individual members and their influence with the President were also very important.

68. Although there was no specific reference to children in the Constitution or the Bill of Rights, such rights were implicitly included in, for example, the right to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly, freedom of religion, equal protection before the law, the right to a speedy public trial and to counsel, and the prohibition of torture and cruel or unusual punishment.

69. Existing legislation had been reviewed to ensure that it did not discriminate against children during the preparation of the initial report and the replies to the Committee's list of issues (CRC/C/Q/MIC/1). Follow-up action to harmonize laws with the Convention, which would require a concerted effort on the part of the Office of the Attorney-General, the Office of the President, the sectoral departments and Congress, would be outlined in the national plan of action.

70. Economic reform efforts were being undertaken with a view to improving the standard of living and reducing individual dependence on Government in the light of the dwindling resources from donor countries. There had been no specific analysis of the impact of economic reform on family behaviour and on the social interaction between families.

71. Mrs. SARDENBERG asked how the Government viewed the best interests of the child in a small country with a very young population, a high fertility rate and no access to contraception because of traditional and religious attitudes; a country in which adolescent health problems included early pregnancy, teenager suicide and drug and alcohol abuse and whose prospects for the future were overshadowed by the forthcoming change in relations with the United States and the associated decline in subsidies. She was particularly interested in learning whether children were being prepared to live and work in the United States, taking advantage of free immigration rights, or to stay at home and fight for survival with less assistance from abroad and a Government bereft of resources.

72. She would like more information about the involvement of the private sector in the privatization exercise. What property was being privatized and who were the purchasers? Could the private sector be induced to offset the Government's dwindling resources so that plans such as those for implementation of the Convention could be carried into effect?

73. Mrs. KARP, noting that child labour in the extended family sometimes prevented children from attending school, asked whether there were any plans to introduce a minimum age for child employment. Had the Federated States considered ratifying Convention No. 138 of the International Labour Organization (ILO) concerning the Minimum Age for Admission to Employment?

74. In the case of a child aged 16 years or older, criminal responsibility depended on a judge's evaluation of the child's physical and mental maturity. The State party deemed that approach to be compatible with article 1 of the Convention but the reference to the possibility of earlier majority in that article was conditional on full protection for the child being maintained. Children in the 16 to 18 age group needed protection in the area of criminal law and procedure because of the possible impact on their future lives. She also drew attention to the possibility of discrimination if, in the absence of objective criteria, one judge's idea of maturity differed from that of another. What were the budgetary or other implications of a general increase in the age of criminal responsibility to 18 years?

75. With regard to the minimum age for marriage, she noted that, if the girl was under 16 years of age, she could marry with parental permission. Did the State party consider that parents had the child's best interests at heart in such situations and what was the judicial view of the resultant breach of the law governing the marriageable age? Had consideration been given to the

possibility of requiring court permission for under-age marriages? She noted that, while contraceptives were available as from the age of 18 years, the traditional age of sexual consent could be as low as 13.

76. What was the situation with regard to juveniles who wished to consult doctors and other professionals about personal problems without involving their parents? Was there any ethical or legal guidance for doctors approached for such assistance?

77. Mrs. PALME said that flexible juvenile justice procedures could be a positive form of traditional social control. Would the State party contemplate extending those procedures up to the age of 18 years? She asked for more information on the evolution of the procedures in question and on the prospects for maintaining them in the modern world.

78. Mrs. OUEDRAOGO said that the laws governing the marriageable age in the different states should be harmonized to avoid abuses. The same applied to the age of sexual consent, particularly in view of the risk of sexual exploitation of children.

79. The report stated that United States laws and policies governed enlistment in the armed forces. Did that also apply to the minimum age of enlistment, even if it was lower than the constitutional age of majority?

80. Mr. KOLOSOV asked whether girls from the Federated States of Micronesia were also being enlisted in the United States armed forces. Was there any information on the number of persons of the two sexes who had enlisted?

81. He asked about the implications of the caste system in the State of Yap and whether it was a form of apartheid.

82. Ms. EEJIMA (Federated States of Micronesia) said that the people of Yap were divided into a higher and a lower caste. Those in the lower caste had fewer traditional privileges and sometimes more obligations. She was not well informed about the degree of segregation involved. The national Government had taken up no position on the caste system but respected its existence. There had been no court cases at national or state level concerning discrimination on grounds of caste. In the State of Yap itself, the caste system was accepted as an integral part of social and political life.

83. The CHAIRPERSON said she was interested in the implications of the caste system for child access to health and education services. Would a child from a higher caste be given priority and would a child from a lower caste meekly accept the situation?

84. Ms. EEJIMA (Federated States of Micronesia) said that the caste system was difficult to describe because the expression carried such negative connotations throughout the world. She was able to state, however, that it was never used as a basis for selectivity or discrimination in the delivery of public services or in providing access to health and educational services.

The meeting rose at 1 p.m.